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The Door and the Dark: Trouble telling tales

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But what reality was ever made by realists? (Flanagan 2014: 22)

Cold whispers under the warmth of the hallway. I fetch my bicycle from the garage, mount in the road, and freewheel down a terraced street to work. Daylight is struggling up across the city as if through smoke.

The top floor of the education block of the university is quiet on the Friday. Trainee teachers are home polishing lesson plans in anticipation of their first school experience, and children are preparing for Halloween at the end of the half term holiday. It is a sensible time to hold a vivaⁱ.

I check the room and see it is already organised with a seat for the candidate close to the entrance and two more opposite for the examiners. Behind the candidate is a place for the supervisor, so there can be no eye contact or collaboration. As chair of proceedings, my role will be to ensure fair play. There is no place set for me, so I pull up a seat at one side, like a tennis umpire. And there is no water. Someone always forgets the water.

I turn to fetch a jug, catch sight of the cityscape and stop, beguiled. Your eyes just have to drink that panorama, from the beacon on the hill ridge, across warehouses and dockland, over the blitzed and rebuilt medieval centre, tracing the spear tips of steeples up again to houses that teeter over the shunting yards of the station.

Then I look inward, returned in time to before this classroom was built. I am standing sharing a cigarette in the technician's room beside the same window with the same single-glazed pane set in its age-warped metal frame and hear the sigh of air through the seal it will never make and the story of the man who jumped out here in some state of mortal despair the full four floors into the parking lot below and lived.

Minutes later, downstairs by the desk of an administrator, I scan hurriedly the examiners' preliminary reports. At this juncture each is suggesting a pass, subject to confirmation according to the outcome of discussion during the viva itself. The external is familiar, since she has examined on a number of occasions for our doctorate of education programme. She has a well-deserved reputation in the field of qualitative inquiry and is known to be rigorous. She enjoys creative research writing that takes a different tack to the habitual, though it will need to get the basics right—she'll certainly pick up on that. And the internal—need to be careful here—likes, let us say, anything that lines his nest. Operates at something of a tangent. As I have heard it remarked on more than one occasion in the post-viva debrief, 'I don't object to the point he was making, but has he actually read my work?'

Sonya, the candidate, I don't really know—a part-time student I think I taught on one of those modules run like a variety show where eight different people turn up over two days to 'talk about research'. Intriguing title, mind you—'The Door and the Dark: A ghosted inquiry'. Presented as a layered text apparently. I hazard a guess at what that might entail. Ghosted inquiry is a new one to me.

The phone rings somewhere off and there is a muffled conversation, followed by, 'Well, let's hope it's all OK.' It transpires that the supervisor has been clobbered by a car on her way in—her leg is a mess and the bike is a write-off. Possibly concussed and waiting in the Infirmary for x-rays. And this is supposed to be a cyclist-friendly city!

So Sonya Morris will be all on her own today. Barely thirty minutes until the viva starts and she must be fretting outside her supervisor's office. One of the admin team heads off up the stairs to explain the situation. Not sure if I should get involved, so pick up the Dictaphone and some plastic cups and go to fill that jug.

At eleven o'clock I am waiting in the viva room when Sonya appears, smiles cautiously and says, 'What a to-do, eh? Oh well, I'm sure I'll survive.' We must be fairly close in age, middish-fifties. Warm to her immediately. Stretch out a hand to introduce myself when the examiners enter the room.

The internal, Don Roper, scowls. 'You should be waiting outside—we haven't given you permission to come in yet!'

I reply, 'It's all right, Don, you were slightly late, and...'

The external steps across Roper. 'Good morning, Sonya, I'm Abby Farfield. Must be unsettling for you that your supervisor couldn't make it. Look, let's make the best of this and just get on with the main event, which is talking about your very

engaging research. How about you sit over there and Don and I will sit here? Are we all alright with that? Now, Malcolm, would you get the formalities over with and explain to Sonya how this process works, and also figure out how to switch on that Dictaphone so we have a record to refer back to in case we need it.'

Five minutes later, the opening question from the external comes as no surprise: 'Just to get us into the flow, could you explain to us the backstory to the research—how it all came about—and in particular what your title signifies?'

Sonya relaxes, her hand rising off the cover of her dissertation, which is tagged with slips of Post-it. Clearly she has rehearsed the possible questions and marked out key quotations.

'Let me start with the title, since explaining that will contextualise the problem I am addressing and also help to frame the research project. 'The Door and the Dark' is a play on two titles—that of a poem and that of a collection of poems.'

She flicks to a page in her dissertation. 'Robert Frost has a poem called 'The Door in the Dark' (1928), which describes walking into a door in the dark of night, which:

hit me a blow in the head so hard

I had my native simile jarred.

So people and things don't pair any more

With what they used to pair with before.

'Bit of a tongue-twister, I know, and when I first read it I did look twice to see whether it said 'simile' or 'smile'. I was grabbed by the conceit, in a literary sense, of double vision that Frost is re-presenting here...'

'Don't you mean, representing?' Don Roper asks.

‘No, as I said, re-presenting—making present again—how writing creates our imagination in the present (Denzin 1995, Lapadat and Lindsay 1999).

‘Those two different uses of ‘pair with’ in the final line are, I would argue, a deliberate doubling.’ She pauses. ‘And also somehow troubling—a circumstance in which ‘people and things’ no longer quite fit. This resonated with my life story.’

Abby Farfield asks, ‘And the other poem?’

‘Seamus Heaney—his second collection, *Door into the Dark* (1969: 19), which is a quotation from the opening line of ‘The Forge’: ‘All I know is a door into the dark.’

‘He is remembering being a boy back in Bellaghy, County Derry and making sense of what is in the gloom behind the forge door. It is another subtle effect of doubling, this time playing off sense and imagination against time—Heaney employs a historical present, ‘All I know is,’ and this brings his past, an event of his youth, perpetually into the now. But even in the now—and this to me is the beauty of the poem’s imaginative projection—what is present is forged by memory:

The anvil must be somewhere in the centre,

Horned as a unicorn

‘The anvil must be...’ Do you see? The poem acts out re-presentation so the boundary between what is real and what is imagined is blurred. Maybe here, like Frost says, the simile of reality has been jarred. Of course, Heaney traverses the real and the fantastic when the anvil becomes ‘horned as a unicorn’.

‘Couldn’t that just be a figure of speech?’ Don Roper again.

‘That’s it. That’s exactly it, an appearance or attitude of speaking, of making a world in words. That’s what ‘figure’ means. Look it upⁱⁱ. And did you know that ‘figure’, ‘fiction’ and ‘feign’ share the same Latin root, *fingere*? (Bruner 1998: 19)’

‘Meaning?’

‘Meaning ‘to form or shape’.’

‘Not clear where we are going here?’

‘Well, this is my argument—the dissertation is about re-presenting experience through memory. Shaping memory is the work of fiction—making worlds out of words, figures, ideas. We can only look into the past as if into the dark behind a door, and we illuminate that dark with words—meanings we fashion from different kinds of sign available to us.’ She pauses. ‘In discourse.’ Sonya hesitates again.

‘Maybe. Haven’t totally made up my mind on that.’

‘And why do you think we make these meanings?’ Abby Farfield prompts.

‘Well, it is inherent to the practice of living. Which is why I am hesitating, because there isn’t a perfect match between being and discoursing. I know that it is argued that discourse allows us to make meaning, and therefore it is the tool we create historically and culturally that lets us be ourselves (Barthes 1975). But...’

She stops herself. Looks past us all and out of the window.

‘But, what?’

‘But, it’s all too, too... definitive—you know, opening line of St. John’s Gospel: ‘In the beginning was the Word and the word was,’ et cetera. I don’t believe in nothing but words, or in words over all. What about us—surely we are more than purveyors of meaning? I mean, at our human best we shine a little light, but at our worst we seem to eclipse even a glimmer of goodness. Maybe we are made more of dark than light. Sorry, probably misquoting Milton there.’

‘This is all very literary and philosophical—bordering on the arcane, even.’

‘I’ll take ‘arcane’, Dr. Roper. In Italian *un’ arca* is a chest, or an ark. A place of safekeeping, where in medieval times we kept grain. Also a container of the holies. The arcane is where we store physical and spiritual succour.’

She laughs to herself. ‘Sorry. I get like this—too much time on my own.’ Then she is off again. It is like watching a yacht tacking against a stiff wind.

‘Do you remember the Fourth Thesis on Feuerbach?’

Sonya reads:

Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the *human*ⁱⁱⁱ essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations. (Marx and Engels 1970: 122)

‘Interesting. So?’ Don Roper asks.

‘So, everything! Humankind creates gods to people the dark inside us, to give us a creative divinity, and to provide an architect for the void beyond ourselves—remember the ‘darknesse that was upon the face of the deepe’^{iv}, in the Bible? We create metaphysical beings because we are lonely and world-weary, but in reality this is us selving ourselves. Maybe that should stand as a definition of narrative inquiry!’

‘A remarkable way of putting it, for sure. Though that’s not quite what you write in your dissertation.’

‘I’m just trying to answer your questions. Am I doing something wrong?’

‘Not at all. You are highly persuasive, poetic even.’

‘My first degree is in English literature, so I tend to equate the symbolic with the social. Sometimes I wonder whether literature hasn’t been doing social science forever. Isn’t it all imagination, even if it’s sociological?’

Again she reads: 'This is C. Wright Mills:

The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical sense in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external careers of a variety of individuals. (1959: 5)

Don Roper intervenes, 'But Wright Mills is advocating a critical method, a scientific way of interrogating society. The literary doesn't overrule the scientific.'

Abby Farfield asks, 'Isn't Wright Mills' argument that we need a critical and social method to dispel the false consciousness that arises from an individualistic perspective? Doesn't he explain sociological imagination as what 'enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two' (1959: 6)?'

'And doesn't literature give us something similar?' Sonya responds. 'Doesn't, for example, the life story of Tess in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) grasp unforgettably the intersection of history, class and gender? How a good woman is driven to murder by the predatory actions of a so-called gentleman?'

'Yes, but Tess is a fictional character—a product of Hardy's imagination. That's hardly scientific or strictly speaking sociological.' Roper's voice becomes agitated.

'And Hardy's imagination is a product of what? Fairy dust? No woman was ever defiled by a member of the ruling class—that's just imagination is it? Sounds like false consciousness to me!'

Dr Roper looks angry, but says nothing.

'To return to my original question,' says Abby Farfield, 'What is the backstory here? We haven't yet resolved the issue of why this research is pertinent.'

There is a notable pause, before Sonya says, ‘Something happened in my family, a long time ago. Something that was never really discussed, that I found out about—a skeleton in the cupboard, in a manner of speaking.’

‘And why is this a project appropriate to doctoral research in the field of education?’

‘Writing about the past is like writing in the dark (van Manen 2002). I know that sounds like a cliché. In fact, it is a big problem for inquiry, so I argue that this issue is a worthy topic because it gets at the methodology of how we reclaim situations.

‘The problem is that the past is always imbricated by the present. Therefore, the past is being made up.’ Sonya dips into her dissertation. ‘Let me find it—this is what Järvinen (2009) argues, drawing on George Herbert Mead (1932/1959):

From the point of view of the present, there is no objective past in the history of individuals, institutions or societies. There is no past to be captured, understood and described in its pure essence. There is only a past - or a plurality of pasts – constructed from the point of view of an ever-changing present. (Järvinen 2009: 320)

‘Järvinen’s argument is that the past does not cause the present, since when that past experience occurred it was not causally connected to any present. The present is causally connected to the past by virtue of us always being in the now—consciousness and being are only constituted as presence. This is what I figure as the (k)now—bracket-k-bracket-n-o-w—in order to show how knowledge is constructed in the moment of knowing’

‘Yes, I saw that. Clever.’

Sonya carries on, 'Järvinen makes this terrific observation:

The present is always in some sense new and abrupt, but once it has occurred, we start on the arduous task of reconstructing the past in terms of it. The abruptness of the present is mitigated by our new perspective on the past, a perspective from which the emergent becomes understandable. (Järvinen 2009: 323)

'Järvinen helps me organise the emergence of any past through a present consciousness, a (k)now, which of course is never a single moment and never a single strand of knowing. We are always stuck in the middle of the process of retrieving the past in the (k)now, which is always slipping backwards and away. I suggest that we think of this process as a fair description of memory work. I'm arguing that we need to educate ourselves about the practice of memory work—its methodology, its doing. So that's my claim to what is educational in the research.'

'OK. This conversation has already anticipated some of our questions. Let's just explore further your theoretical framework, then—tell us who else's writing you review?'

'Well, Derrida—and, to be frank, I find Derrida difficult. I came at him through a reading on one of our EdD units on narrative research. Carol Rambo Ronai introduced me to the idea of a 'layered account', which basically describes how:

impressions from the world become internalized and layered on the existing stocks of knowledge, shifting how that knowledge will affect current and future lived experience. (Rambo Ronai 1999: 115)

'So through the process of writing layering revisits something of the psychological process of accounting for an experience that Järvinen explains. It picks

up on the way in which the physical process, rather like figure-drawing in Rambo Ronai's explanation, is full of erasures—edits, crossings-out, ditched attempts. As she puts it: 'a constant process of correction' (1999: 115).

'And here's the clincher, for me:

Writing in layers reflects the structure of consciousness. As each layer of text is superimposed on the others, each layer contributes to the understanding of the other layers as well as to the overall picture of social life that the text conveys. (1999: 116)

'The layering process is really attractive, but I needed to be more sure of myself with regard to the theory Rambo Ronai is drawing from. She references *Of Grammatology*, (Derrida 1976: 1991), so I looked it up.

'We'd been talking in class about how a number of papers in narrative and qualitative inquiry stress a postmodernist approach, without really situating that in a philosophical tradition. We don't find out what the postmodernists are arguing about.

'Actually, Rambo Ronai's debt to Derrida is neatly explained, and we all really liked the way she produces provocative layered accounts—for instance, the way she summons up her grandmother, Anny Re (Rambo, 2005). In this paper, Rambo (by now she has dropped the Ronai surname) draws a connection between the work of consciousness and that of identity:

Identity, a process dependent on consciousness, likewise, is always left with traces of what went before. Every identity we have experienced is neither fully present nor fully erased. Accumulating impressions from these identities lie beneath the surface influencing the creation of the emergent picture of self.

These impressions, as they build up, provide a relatively stable sense of self.

(Rambo 2005: 564)

‘So this is leading us towards a stable self that we identify through writing, which I think is another way of describing how the social sits behind the literary text—how writing re-presents aspects of social reality. Writing allows us to be—this is not a direct connection with reality but with a sense of being-in-the-world.

‘Derrida (1991) is responding to Heidegger—so his argument concerns the nature of being, ontology, and the way writing grasps or textualises over time some meaning of ourselves that spoken language, being ephemeral, doesn’t. Although this grasping for significance is always diffident and impermanent.

‘As I understand it, Derrida is having a go at structuralist accounts of...’

Don Roper shifts uncomfortably on his chair and looks at Abby Farfield. ‘Do we really need to go into this much detail? We still haven’t got to the nub of the dissertation, or even answered our first question, and we are already a good way through the viva.’

‘I’ll be quick,’ Sonya replies. ‘Probably the foundational paper in narrative research is Roland Barthes’ ‘An introduction to the structural analysis of narrative’ (1975^v), where, following Saussure, he relates the structure of the sentence to the structure of a higher order, called discourse:

Discourse would then be a large ‘sentence’ (whose units do not necessarily have to be sentences) in the same way that a sentence, allowing for certain specifications, is a small ‘discourse.’ (Barthes 1975: 240)

‘This is all in pursuit of presenting the origin of language within some idea of an organizing system, so the argument being made is that humankind produces a ‘secondary, self-multiplying’ system, a language of language, or a tool to make a tool, as Barthes explains (1975: 240). Meaning isn’t made by sentences alone, or by discourse alone, but in their interplay. So Barthes suggests that meaning ‘does not lie ‘at the end’ of the narrative, but straddles it’ (1975: 243).’

Roper has stopped making notes and is gazing, glass-eyed, at the window. Outside the wind is rising and rain is beginning to tap against the pane.

‘OK, OK—overload of theory. Basically Derrida is arguing that Barthes’ idea of a superordinate organizing system returns us to some metaphysical explanation of being, driven by a model of spoken language that assumes that signs sit out there in the ether, so to speak, and guide our every utterance. We’ve recreated a god-like explanation that seems to lie beyond ourselves.

Just like I explained with Järvinen earlier, the past is not a remote actuality, so all signs are fractured and broken and are made in the present and in the moment. Writing is a better model, at least as a metaphor, to get at the actuality of being-in-language, and of knowing-in-the-now, because it holds us to the idea of having to make our meaning in linear time, of writing and re-writing ourselves, of always escaping any origin, of leaving traces and erasures in our wake, and constantly covering them over without hope of recovery.

‘Derrida has this wonderful expression for writing, ‘as an adventure of relationships between the face and the hand’ (1991: 47-48). Writing allows an adventure of identity-making—the power to make beings from ourselves whilst

finding out about ourselves. And that's the adventure on which I set out, which ends up in something of a ghost story.'

Sonya stops, looks relieved, and reaches for her water.

'Perhaps,' says Abby Farfield, 'Now would be a good time to talk about 'The Dead Letters'.'

At which I make my only effective intervention in the whole proceedings.

'Is there any way—and I apologise for seeming a bear of very little brain, but the chair of viva is not given a copy of the dissertation—I might have explained what it is all about? In a nutshell?'

Sonya drains her cup. 'Of course. It's about...'

The rain slaps the window and a low howl issues from the frame.

'This is all rather dramatic, isn't it?' Roper remarks. 'Perfect setting for a ghost story!'

'Chapter 4 centres around a series of letters that I received one day, in a bundle marked 'Dead Letters'. The letters had been sent to an address I left years ago and were forwarded, until it seems the trail ran out. Then at some point, the Post Office identified my current address and... and... there they were.'

'And who are the letters from?' I ask.

'The letters are from someone in my family. From two prisons up north—I won't say where.'

She looks down at her hands, then raises her palms and rests them over her eyes, scrunching the heels into her cheekbones as if erasing tears.

'Later, when I've worked out the story—a horrible bloody story—I wish I had burnt them the day they arrived and then they might never have haunted me.'

‘But, for now, I don’t know what to do. So I don’t do anything.

‘For five years they sit in a big brown envelope in a drawer. I try to forget them. I go to work. I come home. And every time I go near that desk in the spare room I look at that closed drawer and think about those letters.

‘One day I decide enough is enough. I’ve started my doctorate and I want to use the spare room properly as my study. So I open the brown envelope and arrange the letters according to the dates franked on them.

‘I slit the top of the first. There is no address, and no ‘Dear Sonya’, just a single side of writing.

‘At first the forms swim there without meaning. All I can imagine is this bastard’s face. I am shouting, ‘I don’t know you and I don’t want to know.’ I picture excuses tumbling out, and as fast as they spill, I deny them.

‘Then the words on the letter gel. It’s a description of lights out in a cell. Throughout a prison block the lights are switched off. Beyond the cell window the dark falls. But there remains a crack of light seeping through the hatch in the door.

‘The writing is crafted, clearly fashioned for effect and forged over time. At a symbolic level it suggests an urge to forget, or, more accurately, it captures a failure to forget. There is no final darkness of forgetting, and there is always this sliver of light searching out the cell.

‘These letters are written like illuminations. Never the whole story, or the whole truth, but glimpses, incidents, projections, one might say, in which those shafts of light from behind a dark door illuminate a well of being. More exactly the being that was, which is a kind of not-being—present absence, perhaps. Definitely somewhere in between being and not being. I suppose in cinematic terms it would

be like seeing the shadow projected by a body that is out of shot. Or in a paranormal sense, an apparition.'

'You never give us the letters, though, do you?' Abby Farfield says. 'Why is that?'

'Well, I give you my take on them—their appearance to me—the ghostings, as I call them.'

'Explain "ghosting" for us. Why is a "ghosting" a substitute for the thing itself?'

'Just as a word is never the thing itself, but its name, and an aspect of our world of meaning, so the text is never the act itself but a similitude. Remember Frost's simile that gets jarred in the poem I quoted earlier, and how people and things don't match anymore? That's the impression—no, impression is wrong because it conveys a sense of being acted on, pressed on from without, and this didn't feel exterior—maybe phenomenon is better, since it points at the act itself and the way it seems. Doesn't phenomenon mean "appearance" in Greek?' For a moment she looks worried, as if she has backed herself into a corner and can't yet see her way out.

'Carry on—you're making sense—go back to the idea behind ghosting, possibly?' Abby Farfield helps out.

'Alright—I'm going to have to have a run at this.

'Behind Derrida is Heidegger, who has this obsession with word meanings, which I rather admire. This probably comes from the tradition of philology, or word-history. For Heidegger, language is more than communication:

But language is not only and not primarily an audible and written expression of what is to be communicated. It not only puts forth in words and statements

what is overtly or covertly intended to be communicated; language alone brings beings as beings into the open for the first time. (Heidegger 1993: 198)

‘Root words are expressions of philosophy, of how we struggle to know who we are. What I take from Heidegger is the idea that something fundamental about our being lies in the roots of the words we use to express our existence. The roots of some words open out what is meaningful to us in our histories as beings.

‘More than what a word means, I want to understand its trajectory—how it has built up and shifted significance over time, and how that might reflect differences in how we understand ourselves and our position in the world.’

‘The word, ‘ghost’ is a case in point. Look in the *OED Online*, and you will see the etymological speculation that the root comes into Old German from Sanskrit, or Indo-European heritage, and derives from a word meaning “fury, anger”. In non-Germanic languages the sense might go back to that of “to wound, tear, pull to pieces”^{vi}. So “ghost” isn’t a word that our ancestors believed reflects phantasms and figures of the imagination, but one which channels raw emotion and violent action—the kind of event on which one would look aghast.’

‘When I reflected back, after opening and reading the letters, I realised that a ghost was strong in them. I could piece together a train of actions and the events full of fury—an A-Z of cause, crime and punishment.

‘In turn, “ghosting” felt right to describe the process of responding to the being behind the events the letters convey—especially my anger at a carnage that could have ceased at any time if some self-control had just been found.’

Sonya stares out of the window into the grey downpour.

I shift on my seat. There is a nasty draft and appositely the viva seems to have blown itself out.

‘So,’ I ask, ‘These “dead letters” that Dr, Farfield says you didn’t actually give in the dissertation—sorry, but I don’t think I have quite got to the bottom—well, how do we know what actually happened?’

Roper laughs. ‘Wrapped in mystery, those letters. I mean—there’s no real evidence where they come from or if they even exist. There are no facsimiles or anything that validates this correspondence.’

Abby Farfield turns to him. ‘Are you raising a problem concerning ethical procedure, Don? You seem to be insinuating there is a question to answer here, so maybe you should carry it through.’

However, Sonya seems more than ready for the question. ‘I know it requires some suspension of disbelief, but I needed in some way to disguise the originals, not open them to public scrutiny. I do have ethical reasons for not divulging that information directly. I don’t see any reason in leaving a paper trail that could lead back to, or upset, anyone.

‘I do give the reader a sequence of virtual components for a crime—infatuation, rejection, rage, rampage, realisation, remorse, retribution and remand. I also explain the Deleuzian theory whereby memory actualizes events by drawing on virtuality:

In memory the past exists virtually as a collection of past instants or percepts in a state of 'relaxation,' i.e., in a condition in which these percepts are not organized in any particular way with relation to each other. They exist as a dissociated set of singularities. That is, they are virtual. Furthermore, this past

is not something apart from the present but something that is contained in the present. The entire past (as memory) is part of each present. Recollection is a process of actualizing this virtuality, of differentially repeating the percepts along a particular series, a series that arranges or organizes them in a particular manner, a way of bringing the past to bear on the present. (Colwell 1997: ¶111)

‘I do, therefore, signal a relationship that points you in the direction of the objectivity of the events, although I do not give actual events.

‘I’m not sure that validity is an issue. I mean, that’s the conundrum, isn’t it—how does one validate a ghost?’

Roper responds, ‘Oh, I don’t know—there is something about this ghosting business that disturbs me.’ He laughs. ‘I mean, accepted, Sonya—the paper trail point—public getting hold of—well, I can see that—but isn’t there still an issue of veracity, even if we can’t stretch to validation? Why rewrite the letters? Doesn’t that damage their truthfulness, or displace some element of their reality? Why not just leave them as they are? Why all the literary sleight of hand? It all seems unnecessarily postmodern and contrived to me. Sorry, Abby, I held back from mentioning it in my report.’

‘Postmodern isn’t a term I employ, and that is deliberate. There’s a good part of my penultimate chapter that deals with my disquiet with postmodernism.’

Abby Farfield sighs, ‘This really isn’t going the way I’d hoped. Perhaps, Don, we could stick to the questions we agreed?’ She eyes him, quite fiercely in my opinion.

Roper sets his jaw, but says nothing.

‘Sonya, explain the reasoning behind Chapter 4, where we read your ghostings of the actual letters, and then your replies. Your methodological reasoning, I mean.’

‘I needed some way of foregrounding the subjective lens of inquiry and backgrounding the objective. I don’t want to oppose subjective and objective here, so I take Ratner’s concern seriously:

Objectivism is the highest form of respect for the subjects we are studying. It respects their psychological reality as something meaningful and important which must be accurately comprehended. (Ratner 2002: ¶14)

‘However, if the objective view prioritises the kind of validation and verification issues that Dr. Roper is raising, then, given my ethical concerns and needing to find a way around, I reasoned that drawing attention to the subjective—that is, placing the potential reader alongside the researcher—would loosen the bond with what actually happened and strengthen it in terms of how I interpret the letters.

‘So, my ghostings of the letters denote the angry remains of what I feel this other person feels in relation to what has been done. In turn, this raises other spectres—that is, the anger I feel at re-voicing another’s anger.

‘This is a process I call ghosted inquiry, in which I subsume the other’s emotional remains, so to speak, through my writing. The original body of words might have slipped out of existence, but not the feelings they provoke.

‘Calling Chapter 4, ‘Dead Letters’ is a methodological joke—a way of playing with the jarred simile at the heart of the meaning of the chapter title, and with the process of constructing the past from the vantage of the present. Ghosting describes the different emergences of the past at different points of (k)nowing.’

‘But you use a doubly artificial means of organising this succession of ghostings, don’t you? Explain that.’ Roper demands.

‘I wouldn’t call it artificial. I do term it “aesthetic”, though. This reflects my reluctance to call what I am doing “postmodern”. I mean, nearly everyone on my course leapt on postmodernism as if it offered a licence to tear up the rulebook.’ She grimaces. ‘You find out fairly quickly that ripping up the rules doesn’t stop you from being judged.

‘I’m getting ahead of myself. On my reading spree of a literature review I thought it was important that I try to fathom out what postmodernism entails—partly set off by a friend who took a degree in philosophy rolling her eyes and muttering, ‘So passé!’ every time I brought up the subject.

‘We’d been introduced to the idea of making different kinds of ‘judgement calls’ (Speedy 2008: 55) in order to be able to reflect on the merit of a particular written or visual representation of lived experience. So I do recognize the necessity of entering into some discussion of whether what I have presented is good enough in terms of connecting us with the feelings evoked in the events of the letters. From a literary perspective, and from my belief, as I stated earlier, that literature can provide a powerful medium for apprehending experiences formed in social reality, I buy into Speedy’s criterion of ‘aesthetic merit’ (2008: 56). I am also mindful of her warning that, ‘Different aspects of these criteria wear their cultural history differently’ (2008: 57), so this reinforced my need to dig around in the cultural history of postmodernism.

‘I discovered that many of the writers invoked in the cause of postmodernism—Lyotard, Foucault, Deleuze—don’t refer to themselves as

postmodernists, nor do they necessarily oppose modernism with postmodernism, but argue their interrelation and progression (Habermas 1980, Peters 1999, Aylesworth 2013). Then, as I dug deeper, I discovered that judgement itself:

must be aesthetic insofar as it does not produce denotative knowledge about a determinable state of affairs, but refers to the way our faculties interact with each other as we move from one mode of phrasing to another (Aylesworth 2013: 6, referring to Lyotard 1985 1988)

‘Obviously, this gave me pause for thought, since it implies that in these ‘faculties that interact with each other’ there is something else proposed as existing beyond utterance—something that looks very like some kind of abstract and internal structure that postmodernism rebels against.’

Sonya finds a page near the end of her dissertation. ‘Habermas points out how radical movements in modernist Art (painting, literature, music, and so on) have frequently rebelled against the aesthetic norms of an age or practice, and how ‘to retract all criteria and to equate aesthetic judgement with the expression of subjective experiences’ constitutes an experiment in ‘nonsense’:

These experiments have served to bring back to life, and to illuminate all the more glaringly, exactly those structures of art which they were meant to dissolve. (1980: 1755).

‘Habermas returns us to appreciation of the potential social contract art forges with experience. Aesthetic merit, for example, in my appropriation of his argument, still needs to do justice to the human condition.

So lurking behind—the ghost at the banquet, so to speak—is a very post-Hitler, post-Stalin concern for the means and control and expression of justice in social life.

No supreme being, no dictator, no father- or mother-figure, but the ideal of justice worked out through communication.'

Sonya looks both her examiners in the eye. 'I like that,' she says. 'I aspire to that re-presentation of justice. We need it. I need it.'

She turns back to her dissertation. 'I like these words from Ursula Le Guin's acceptance speech at the National Book Awards (2014):

Hard times are coming, when we'll be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine real grounds for hope. We'll need writers who can remember freedom—poets, visionaries—realists of a larger reality.

'This is what I want from writing and research—that it helps us realise a larger reality.'

It is one of those definitive moments in any viva when one knows that the candidate has won the day.

A familiar voice cuts through. 'Still haven't really answered my question. Why did you feel the need to rewrite the letters?'

An intake of breath. A smile as thin as fishing line.

'In order to confuse the trail leading back to the original experiences, I needed to become a kind of ghostwriter. And the best model for that kind of rewriting that I could think of was through a literary analogy with what poets do by reconstructing experience through heightened, sometimes symbolic language, framed by a particular form. Like in the Heaney poem, I wanted to look through the forge door

and illuminate the dark. Like Heaney, what I am imagining is already familiar and known, so it is a projection of experience as a re-presentation.

‘When I first saw “dead letters” written on that bundle, what immediately came into my head was a poem. It’s by Gerard Manley Hopkins. One of what are known as the ‘terrible sonnets’ (Reeves in Hopkins 1954: xxv). So when I finally opened the letters I knew I had a kind of simile of experience—a very close equivalent, which would allow me to make a ghosting.

‘I can quote the first octet—I learnt it by heart in the sixth form:

I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.

What hours, O what black hoürs we have spent

This night! what sights you, heart, saw; ways you went!

And more must, in yet longer light’s delay.

With witness I speak this. But where I say

Hours I mean years, mean life. And my lament

Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent

To dearest him that lives alas! away.

‘There were four letters, and I arranged them—I mean, like a musical arrangement—in a series. I narrativised them, would be another way of putting it. There was a set of events being reported, which I plotted and composed under headings taken from the lexis of the sonnet: ‘dark fall’; ‘black hours’; ‘with witness’; ‘years mean life’. Then I wrote four back at them: ‘dearest’; ‘deep decree’; ‘flesh filled blood’; ‘spirit, see’.

‘You have to know the second sestet to appreciate the battle of sentiment:

I am gall, I am heartburn. God’s most deep decree

Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me;

Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the curse.

Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours. I see

The lost are like this, and their scourge to be

As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse.

(Hopkins 1885/1954: 69)

‘That’s it, really—that’s my way of doing myself justice in terms of my feelings.

And—this is my hope for my research argument—that it does justice to how one might go about such inquiry, theoretically and methodologically.’

‘Well, I like it,’ says Abby Farfield. ‘Perhaps it is a little premature to be giving you feedback, but this is original and provocative work. I like your tendency to raise notes of disquiet.’

‘Thank-you.’

‘Well, let’s not count our chickens before they are hatched. Perhaps you could just sum up for us by explaining your connection of ghosting with layering—why is this a layered text, as you claim?’

‘OK—so contrary to popular belief, layered writing isn’t about patching together different pieces of inquiry or types of text. If I read Rambo Ronai (1999, 2005) right then layering is a reflexive and cyclical process of revealing experience by stripping back, deconstructing, whilst building up—much as one might do whilst drawing and painting: ‘As I draw and erase, the process becomes one of continuous exploration, adjustment, and correction’ (Rambo 2005: 564).

‘Therefore, the paradox, both in existence and in writing, is that for every layer of meaning one peels away another is being laid down. Even as we seem to be

moving backwards into the depth of our recovery of experience, we are actually moving forward in our re-experience of it. This is why I argue that inquiry writing is a haunting process.

‘Actually, what I’d like to do is read you the closing page of the dissertation, since I believe it does sum up what you are requesting, and I could not do the argument justice in trying to recall it:

‘[Reading] Ghosts are likenesses, similitudes, similes of our uncertainty regarding the unknown and what comes before and after life. Ghosts are like questions of whether and what and why commingled. Ghosts are fears and furies and feelings that return, remains that will not rest.

‘If we can only be real through our senses and our words, working away at our experiences with tools, like language, we have made to mine our modes of apprehension for their lodes of meaning, then we live excavating layers as fast as they settle. We live drowning in now and knowing it, endlessly seeing our own selves as spirits retreating just as we summon them anew.

‘We live in the middle, always in the middle, blanketed by our recollections of what is passing away and our premonitions of what might come. Life might start and life might end but we live *in medias res*, in the midst of things, not in a narrative and at best just capable of narrating ourselves.

‘Lyotard argues: ‘The only thing absolutely certain, and to say this is not to do ontology, is that there are phrases’ (1992: 405). For sure, it is impossible to think without signs, but maybe we mistake utterance for being, discourse for knowing? Is Habermas (1980) perhaps suggesting that we need to strip back more layers of our

modern sensibility and question the deeds that lie beyond the horizon of our words?

Isn't what we say a ghost of what we do?'

I look up suddenly—not towards the window but through the opaque glass wall that separates our room from the corridor. A shadow—not sure whether male or female—moves along the wall and seems to rest there. Nobody else notices, not directly facing that way. We have been examining now for quite some time. It is already well into lunch break and I wonder whether someone else has the room booked for the afternoon.

Sonya continues reading. 'Like Badiou, I am still wedded to a sense of being. One of the touchstones of my argument is this passage I read some time ago and have been puzzling over ever since:

One could say, with Deleuze: beyond the one and the multiple, beyond identity and difference, beyond time and eternity. But 'beyond' obviously does not signify either a synthesis or a third, transcendent, term. 'Beyond' means: in the middle; there where in the rhizomatic network virtualisation and actualisation are exchanged into each other.^{vii} Being is that which activates the essential falsity of the true and virtualises the truth of the false; being is that which lets the goodness, the infernal goodness of evil, emerge, and also that which lets the terrible malevolence of the good unfold. (Badiou 2000: 194)

'Maybe I have struggled too long with not being good enough and need another way of thinking. Maybe I need a way of judging myself that realises imperfection. Maybe the realisation of imperfection is a more valid project personally and socially than the perfection of truth. Maybe in order to be at all, and

certainly to be true to ourselves, we have to look for good in the bad in the world and anticipate bad in our good. Maybe that is the only way to our larger reality, now that hard times are upon us. Maybe our only blessing lies in those peacemakers who survive the depravities of our warmongering. Maybe in the larger beyond our only hope is to realise reconciliation.'

It is an impressive conclusion and I see that Don Roper is looking convinced. He swings back in his chair and announces, 'That sounds like an ending to me, Sonya. What do you think, Dr Farfield?'

'Actually I do have one final question.'

'OK.'

'I do have a worry regarding the ethics of your research.'

'Oh?' Sonya looks anxious.

'I presume you were required to seek approval of your research intention through your university's ethics' procedure?'

'Yes—I did. There is a long section on ethics in the final chapter in which I reflect on the issues raised by the research.'

'Yes. I read that. However, I note that the education department expects you to have had an ethics' conversation with your supervisor and that the summary of that conversation is submitted as an appendix to the dissertation. I don't see it.'

'No. Sorry—it is an oversight—I was in quite a rush to meet my final deadline for submission.'

'Did your supervisor have an opportunity to check your dissertation before it was submitted?'

‘No—as I say, I was right up against it. To be honest, I didn’t even show her the final draft.’

‘My concern is for this family member, whose letters you use. Did you seek permission to use the letters? Have you sought informed consent? Surely you and your supervisor must have thought of this?’

‘Well, it is difficult. The family situation is difficult. And the person in question is no longer around.’

‘Life history research tends to be difficult—especially if it involves family. Did you not think about Sikes’ (2010) warning about the possibility of people being upset by reading researchers’ portrayals?’

‘Well, I have thought about that, but I don’t think there is much chance of this person reading my writing, to be honest.’

‘Well, not thinking that there is ‘much chance’ is your judgement call of at least some probability, rather than a categorical ‘no chance’, surely? You seem to be tacitly acknowledging that these experiences, that we are led to believe are those of somebody in your family—even though you have taken great pains to disguise the trail, as you said earlier—might still reflect someone’s private life without their approval or consent.

‘Let me just remind you what Sikes writes:

[H]ow we describe people's lives is how they appear to, and in, the world through our writing, however much any depiction is the result of our own auto/biographical interpretation, the product of our vocabulary and our skill with words, the outcome of our concern to use the life/lives to support a particular argument and/or our theorising, and so on. (Sikes 2010: 15)

‘Somewhere out here in the world is the potential for someone to be hurt because you are claiming their experiences for your argument. This isn’t a ghost we are talking about. This isn’t a figure or conceit in a clever poetics of methodology. This is a real person in this larger reality you mention, and they deserve justice.

‘My worry is that—for all your cleverness and sophistication with ideas, which I cannot fault—you have overlooked the blindingly obvious.

‘Have you really considered how this other person might feel to have these experiences intimated to the wider world?’

We all look at Sonya, who is trembling. The room seems suddenly very cold.

Sonya looks at me, ‘Could you turn off the Dictaphone, please?’

‘I knew I wasn’t going to get away with it,’ she says ruefully.

The shadow outside the room lifts off the opaque glass wall. Momentarily, a woman’s face appears at the door and glances in. Whatever she sees seems to satisfy her, and she leaves. It is nobody I recognize. I hear her footsteps retreating as she goes.

‘It was a long time ago—over thirty years. I have changed my name. I have changed the details. I have no family that owns me now. Nobody can make connections because I no longer am as I was.

‘I’ll tell you only what I have told my supervisor. You cannot pass this information on, so it stays in this room between us. I will not tell you my original name. You will have to accept that what I am about to tell you is truthful, if not the whole truth.

‘I was training to be an English teacher. Not here. I fell in love with another teacher during my Spring term placement. She was married. I got my first teaching

job at her school. It all went wrong. I lost it in the car park one evening. Her husband took her death badly and tried to kill himself.'

In the window, Sonya's reflection seems to stare back at her and moan.

'I paid over many years. In prison the only friends I had lived in books and songs.

'There was one that seemed to sing endlessly in my head:

Just when I think I'm winning

When I've broken every door

The ghosts of my life

Blow wilder than before

(Sylvian 1981)

'So when I got parole, when I started sorting out my life outside, I couldn't go back to teaching, but I could keep on studying—Open University, extramural courses, that sort of thing. Working full time and taking it bit by bit. And eventually, I found a place in myself where I wanted to reach back into my dark. And this narrative research seemed to offer me the chance to make a door.

'But concealment is everything—erasing the footprints and covering over the traces, so the track leads back but never arrives, so people and things don't pair any more—this is the only kind of inquiry I can honestly commit to.'

Sonya laughs, 'Right from the start I knew I would end up doctoring my doctorate.

'So it comes down to providing a piece of paper from someone that shows informed consent in order to pass this viva, does it?'

She traces the title page of her dissertation with her fingertips.

‘Sonya—this is who I am now—Sonya. Sonya Morris is the author of this work.

What’s to stop me giving this other ‘me’ permission? I don’t have to give my real name, and nobody will know who ‘I’ was—I just have to consent to being the other member in a family, which no-one except us will know really numbers one.

‘Where’s the lie in that?’

CODA

Coda is the Italian word for tail; as a formal device in music and literature it supplies a conclusion, an end. For Labov (1997), the coda of an oral story returns the utterance to its present as a way of finalizing the narrative act. My tale already has an ending, so this other tail I am writing must be returning us to someplace other than the time and world of Sonya’s story. Some other genre, with an uneasy connection to the institution of writing in the social sciences (Bazerman 1981, Watson 2011), is becoming written into being.

In general, I am loath to reflect beyond a tale itself, because I believe it should have sufficient backbone to support its own weight of interpretation, and will do, if it is well enough crafted. However, I realise that a handbook designed for narrative inquirers does expect some rationale concerning the craft of research, so although I won’t be telling you (and me) what ‘The Door and the Dark’ means, I would like to discuss my intention. My single caveat is that intentionality (Crotty 1998, Jacob 2014) reaches out to ideas and possibilities that are discovered in the tracks and their obliteration by which writing proceeds. Whilst writing ‘The Door and the Dark’,

and later writing this coda, I did not work forearmed with what I wished to state—it emerged in the work itself.

I wanted (here is intentionality plain as day) to write a tale that could serve an academic argument whilst remaining a piece of fiction. As a university teacher of research methods that explore that panoply of approaches we might call ‘narrative inquiry’, I have tried here to journey in my professional world. However, my process of inquiry is not simply directed by experience—I do not think my method is to drive forward in an act of extension from historical actuality, starting with facts and reworking them artistically to create a nonfiction (Sparkes 2002: 155). ‘The Door and the Dark’ is not a fictionalisation of a real event any more than it is a realisation of a fictional idea—it is a mess of both and more besides. It summons a textual world, which could only happen in writing—a semic world (Peirce 1906) of layers that peel, wear away, stratify and buckle, to reveal no more reality or permanence than written culture and its institutions afford. The ‘writer’s problem’, according to Van Manen, is that ‘every word kills and becomes the death of the object it tries to represent’ (2002: 244). This is the irreality that fiction makes.

There is lived experience at play in the tale, particularly Sonya’s history as a student of English literature and teacher of English, which is my background—both of us are unruly lay members of the sociological and psychological churches that tend to organise worship in the form of educational research. The Bristol location is my take on where I live and work and the university building is portrayed fairly accurately as it is now and as it was over twenty years ago. I name check the programme I teach. I

do examine doctoral theses and dissertations and I do sit in the vivas of my supervisees when they are examined. On the other hand, I have never come across a dissertation even remotely similar to Sonya's. I have never experienced as supervisor or examiner the problem my tale unravels. All the names and events are made up and are not actual people cunningly disguised.

All that you have read drifts in that somewhere between what is and what if (Reed 2011) that is no place at all. Only in a world fabricated through imagination have I been there in that room with Sonya. Yet I have been in and around that imagined room for days and days.

Arthur Frank explains that: 'Research is, in the simplest terms, one person's representation of another' (2005: 966). Frank explores, through the work of the Russian critical theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, the concept of dialogicality—how all utterance necessitates discourse with an other, even when talking to and of one's self. Frank is arguing the ethics of research writing, that 'in a dialogical relation, any person takes responsibility for the other's becoming, as well as recognizing that the other's voice has entered one's own' (2005: 967). Writing has a powerful act of responsibility for becoming others, and what and whom one becomes, yet these acts of representation and re-presentation are necessarily unfinalized, never fully finished, never complete in meaning or truth or reality:

[T]he researcher never understands a person as fixed in any representation of his or her words. Instead, the meaning of any present story depends on the stories it will generate. One story *calls forth* another, both from the storyteller

him or herself, and from the listener/recipient of the story. (Frank 2005: 967)

For me too, Bakhtin has been one of those thinkers with whom over the years I 'engage in a running conversation' (Crotty 1998: 216). Dialogicality is artfully, actively, in its ethical sense even wickedly at play in 'The Door and the Dark'. However, the question I think that I am asking, both of myself and through what the tale inquires, is from where this calling forth of others that are and are not ourselves happens? If one's first bat in the game of inquiry through writing is not at experience and one is not creating a nonfiction, then the alternative field on which to start is aesthetic rather than experiential. Of course, this other starting-point is frequently explained as a field of aesthetic experience through reference to what one has read, and of course these rich fictive worlds of imagination and their texts come out to play in Sonya's dissertation. Which of course is just a pretend dissertation after all, isn't it? But aren't there places beyond factual and literary experience from which to write—places, that is, within the process of writing itself? Which is to speak of writing as a place and process of self—perhaps a procession of selvings? And solvings. And dissolvings.

Steeped in Russian language and literature, one of the first scholars to introduce Bakhtin's work and ideas to the West was Tzvetan Todorov. Foremost among them is one to do with creative activity, which Bakhtin would call aesthetic activity:

Bakhtin asserts the necessity of distinguishing between two stages in *every* creative act: first the stage of empathy or identification (the novelist puts himself in the place of his character), then the reverse movement whereby the

novelist returns to his own position. This second aspect of creative activity is named by Bakhtin with a new Russian coinage: *vnenakhodimost*, literally “finding oneself outside,” which I shall translate, again literally, but with a Greek root, as *exotopy*. (Todorov, 1984: 99)

Finding oneself outside and returning to oneself. Finding oneself outside and not being able to return to oneself. Is this Sonya’s dilemma? And by extension is this the danger of all writers and inquirers who set off to explore worlds of self and realms of experience?

And when it succeeds, this seeing ourselves, is it reality we reach? According to Bakhtin^{viii}:

When it [seeing oneself from the outside] succeeds, what is striking, in our external image, is a sort of strange *void*, its *ghostlike* character, and its somewhat *sinister* loneliness. (Bakhtin quoted in Todorov 1984: 95)

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ⁱ A *viva voce* is an examination 'by live voice' in defence of one's dissertation or thesis, usually for the award of a doctorate. In the British university system this normally entails a closed meeting in which the candidate is questioned on his or her written dissertation (submitted to examiners in advance) by an external and internal examiner (one expert appointed from outside the university awarding the qualification, and one appointed from inside). The candidate's academic supervisor is normally invited to the viva in a non-speaking capacity. In some universities an independent chair is invited to oversee the process. When the examiners are satisfied that sufficient questions have been asked to explore the candidate's claim to having achieved a doctoral level of research, the candidate and supervisor withdraw and the examiners decide their recommendation, which is told subsequently to the candidate face to face. It is usual that examiners recommend a pass and also require the candidate to make corrections and changes to the written dissertation within a strict time period, after which the degree may be awarded by the university's examinations' committee. Different countries have differing traditions and practices regarding the viva—in many European contexts the oral defence is a public event.

ⁱⁱ 'figure, n.'. OED Online. September 2014. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/70079?rskey=ICVp0j&result=1&isAdvanced=false>

ⁱⁱⁱ In this article, any use of italic in a quotation is given in the original.

^{iv} King James Bible (1611) Genesis, 1.2

http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/1611_Genesis-Chapter-1/

^v First published in French in 1966.

^{vi} 'ghost, n.'. OED Online. September 2014. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/78064?isAdvanced=false&result=1&rskey=w3m0tq&>

^{vii} Badiou, A. (2000) 'Of life as a name of being, or, Deleuze's vitalist ontology', *Pli*, 10: 191-199 is a translation from the French. The English text actually reads 'virtualisation and actualization are exchanged into each other being is that which activates...' This is an oversight in the editing of the paper and I have proposed a more logical punctuation based on a different translation to be found in Badiou, A. (2006) *Briefings on Existence: a short treatise on transitory ontology*; trans. ed. and intro. N. Madarasz, Albany: State University of New York: 65.

^{viii} Bakhtin's works are not listed in my references since in this instance I am referring to Todorov (1984) who is quoting from a Russian publication that is not available in English.